# Fairbury Has Had 44 Postmasters

By: Dale C. Maley

The recent advent of AI (Artificial Intelligence) technology is giving the average user new capabilities. A couple of years ago, when he was still Fairbury Postmaster, Mike Maffett suggested the author do a Fairbury history story about all the postmasters Fairbury has ever had. That idea was recorded in a growing list of potential future stories. However, one major problem quickly became apparent—how to actually develop a complete and accurate list.

Searching through nearly 150 years of Blade newspapers would have been a very time-consuming task. Recently, the author asked ChatGPT for help. The program suggested a much simpler approach: contacting the right person at the United States Postal Service headquarters. An email was sent, and within just a few days, a complete official list arrived. This official list can be viewed using this link.

That list showed that Fairbury has had 44 postmasters and acting postmasters since the office was established on February 16, 1858.

The response from the Postal Service even confirmed something the author had mentioned in the email—that Fairbury had originally been misnamed "Fairburgh" in the early records. It was interesting to see that even today, the official records still note that anomaly.

**Who Was the First Postmaster?**

According to the official postal records, Henry H. McKee was appointed as the first postmaster on February 16, 1858.

However, longtime Fairbury historian Alma Lewis James tells a slightly different, more complete story. In her 1967 book Stuffed Clubs and Antimacassars, she noted that John Coomer served as the first postmaster, temporarily, until the federal government made an official appointment.

As she wrote: "Coomer was proud of his distinction of having built the first new house in Fairbury, and he had started the first lumber yard. He served as the first postmaster, too, until the Federal Government formally appointed one for the new town."

This temporary postmaster assignment makes sense when considering how a new town functioned in 1857. Fairbury had just been established along the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad. It took time for the federal government to establish a post office and officially appoint a postmaster. During that interim period, someone had to handle the mail—and John Coomer stepped forward to do just that.

**A Colorful Early Citizen**

John Coomer was not just Fairbury's temporary postmaster—he was one of the town's most colorful early residents.

He was a very large man, reportedly weighing over 300 pounds, and was well known for sitting barefoot on a fence in front of his home. The fence sagged under his weight, but townspeople viewed him with respect. He was one of Fairbury's early businessmen, a landowner, and something of a local financier.

Coomer was known for his extreme frugality. Stories passed down over the years describe how he carefully saved money, kept coins hidden in unusual places, and closely monitored any loans he made. Despite his thrifty nature, he played an important role in helping the young community grow.

Coomer's service as a temporary postmaster helped bridge the gap between the town's founding and the arrival of formal federal oversight.

**When Fairbury Was "Fairburgh"**

One of the most interesting parts of the postal history is the early confusion over the town's name.

When Fairbury officials submitted paperwork to establish a post office, the name came back from Washington as "Fairburgh, Illinois." Whether this was a clerical error or a misunderstanding is still unknown.

This naming error created confusion for several years. Some residents used the correct spelling, Fairbury, while others followed the official federal designation of Fairburgh. Some even spelled it "Fairburg."

The Civil War prolonged this confusion. With national attention focused on the war between 1861 and 1865, correcting the name of a small Illinois post office was not a priority.

As a result, soldiers from the area enlisted under both spellings. Records show that some listed their hometown as Fairbury, while others listed Fairburgh.

Artifacts from this period are rare but do exist. A few envelopes with Fairburgh postmarks have survived. There are also references in newspapers and documents using the incorrect spelling.

Finally, on April 24, 1866, the name was officially corrected to Fairbury. From that point forward, the spelling gradually became consistent.

## A Glimpse Inside the Post Office in 1935

Another fascinating piece of Fairbury postal history comes from a 1935 document showing the transfer of property between postmasters.

This document lists the equipment in the Fairbury Post Office at that time. It included one Royal typewriter, one Dalton adding machine, several postal cancelling machines, scales for weighing mail, mail sacks for rural and city carriers, and the various stamps, ink pads, and forms needed to run the office.

This list provides a snapshot of how the post office functioned in the mid-1930s. It was a busy operation handling both local and rural mail, with equipment that represented the technology of the time.

However, one part of the document stands out as unusual. It also lists property belonging to the War Department, including a .45-caliber revolver, ammunition, a holster and belt, and a ½-ton Chevrolet truck.

At first glance, it might seem odd that a small-town post office would have military-issued equipment.

## Why Did the Post Office Have War Department Property?

During the early 20th century, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, the United States experienced several high-profile mail robberies. Criminal gangs often targeted post offices, mail trucks, and railway mail cars because they sometimes carried cash, registered mail, and valuable packages.

As a result, the federal government took steps to protect the mail. In some cases, postmasters and postal employees were authorized to carry firearms. Equipment supplied through the War Department helped ensure the security of federal property.

The presence of a revolver, ammunition, and even a truck in the Fairbury Post Office inventory suggests that mail security was taken seriously, even in smaller communities.

It also serves as a reminder that the post office was not just a place to send letters—it was an important part of the nation's infrastructure, handling money, documents, and goods that needed protection.

## A Long Line of Service

From Henry H. McKee in 1858 to the most recent appointments in 2025, Fairbury's 44 postmasters and acting postmasters have played an important role in the community.

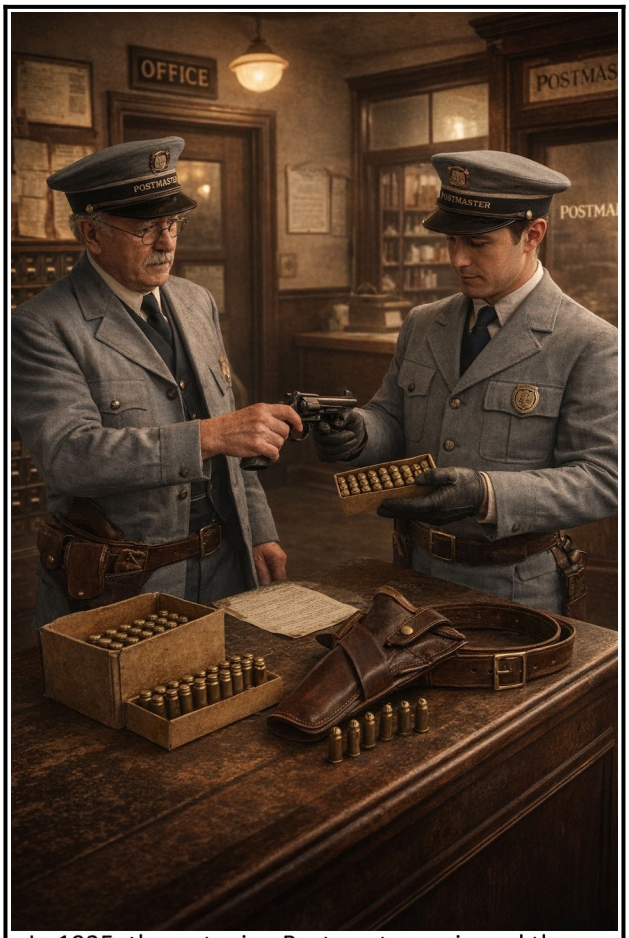
Some served for many years, while others held the position for shorter periods. Together, they represent more than 165 years of continuous service.

The post office has evolved—from pony express routes and handwritten letters to modern automated systems and digital communication. Yet its role as a vital connection between people has remained constant.

**Closing Thoughts**

This story would not have been possible without the assistance of new AI technology, which helped identify the right person at the United States Postal Service. What once might have required weeks or months of research was accomplished in just a few days.

As AI programs continue to improve, it will be interesting to see how historians and researchers use these tools to uncover new information and preserve the stories of communities like Fairbury.




In 1935, the outgoing Postmaster reviewed the inventory list and contents with the new Postmaster. Included in this inventory was a .45 caliber revolver, ammunition, and a holster.